

# Case Study

## State County Collaboration Leads to Successful Wind Farm Siting

### The Problem

All year long, relentless wind coming off the Pacific slices eastward through the Columbia Gorge. Sherman County Oregon, population 1,900, lies directly in the path of the wind. Since 1881, residents have endured these conditions and sustained an economy based primarily on farming. Yet unemployment and low wages plague the region.



In 2001, wind-power developers targeted Sherman County as a potential development site, bringing new hope for the local economy. Vast farm land, constant wind, and an ailing economy made the county ideal for a new, 24-megawatt wind farm.

Wind energy is a growing industry but permitting procedures are slow, complex and prone to controversy. Two-hundred-foot high wind turbines can threaten certain bird populations and sensitive Native American cultural sites, and impact aviation, weed control, and other ecological concerns.

Anticipating conflict, Governor Kitzhaber intervened and initiated a collaborative process in which government, private interests, and the local community could work as a team to address the issues and find a solution. The project is part of Oregon Solutions, a network initiated by the state and comprised of business, non-profit, and government leaders working together to encourage problem solving at the community level.

Oregon Solutions projects involve five elements:

- 1) a problem defined by the community;
- 2) a convener appointed by the Governor;
- 3) a team of stakeholders made up of federal, state, local and other governmental entities;
- 4) a search for a solution that leverages the resources of the team; and
- 5) a declaration of cooperation that commits team members to the agreed action plan.

### The Policymakers

Governor Kitzhaber appointed Judge John Mabrey, a respected local leader from an adjoining county, as Chair. Kitzhaber asked Mabrey to convene a team of stakeholders and implement a consensus-based process to work toward a solution supporting the economic, environmental, and community objectives of Sherman County.

### Other Players

Government participants included representatives of the Governor's office and 12 city, county, state, and federal agencies. Private industry participants included representatives of Northwest Wind Power (NWWP), utilities, permitting specialists, and attorneys. Citizens groups also played a role, with representation from the Audubon Society, local farmers, land owners, and the Warm Springs Tribe.

### The Process

During their first meeting, stakeholders discussed the process, set ground rules, and identified six issues: land use, bird migration, aviation, weed control, cultural concerns, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. Next, the group formed sub-teams to address each issue separately.

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After careful research, NWWP chose a site location and operation size (16 turbines/24 megawatt) that would have minimal negative impact on the community and environment. The process provided a forum in which the developer could explain the precautions, gain confidence and support from stakeholders, and when necessary, alter plans.

The bird migration issue had the most potential for conflict, but parties were able to reach a solution. Traditionally, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) requires a two-year study to determine potential threats to bird populations. After a one-year study showed that "bird kill" was minimal, ODFW agreed to finalize its review if NWWP conducted a "post mortality" study after operations began. NWWP agreed, and this simple compromise advanced the process one year.

The final stage required all participants to agree to the plan and sign a declaration of cooperation. The declaration confirmed each member's full support and commitment of resources to the final plan.

## The Product

Governor Kitzhaber's commitment to the process and decision to implement a collaborative approach was critical. The endorsement from the state and guidance from Oregon Solutions helped the group to expedite the permitting process—traditionally a long and cumbersome endeavor. The wind farm was conceived, permitted, and built in 10 months. Operations began in December 2001, and eight months of "bird kill" studies show minimal impact to bird populations.

Referring to this new form of governance, Kitzhaber said, "There is incredible knowledge in Oregon about the challenges we face and ways to deal with them. What is missing is the place and opportunity to... solve these problems together. It is time to create such a place..."

For more information about this case, contact Abby White, Oregon Solutions Network Manager, at [awhite@pdx.edu](mailto:awhite@pdx.edu).



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This case study is published jointly by the Policy Consensus Initiative (PCI) and its applied research and development arm, the National Policy Consensus Center (NPCC). PCI is a national non-profit organization that promotes consensus building and effective problem solving in states. NPCC is a center of expertise on consensus building for public leaders.

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